DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 625 EA 030 265

AUTHOR Lewis, Roben W.
TITLE Blo k Scheduling: Changing the System.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Block Scheduling; Discipline; Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Flexible Scheduling; School Schedules

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses why scheduling is a valuable but untapped resource for school improvement. It reviews some of the problems that are alleviated through scheduling, focusing on the benefits of block scheduling. The text discusses the fragmentation of instructional time and how this is an issue at all levels of precollegiate education. It offers examples of how some high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools redesigned their schedules to reduce curriculum fragmentation, discipline problems, and student failure. Disciplinary problems can also result from fragmentation, particularly at the elementary level where small-group reading is scheduled. Even in middle schools and high schools, traditional schedules create situations that may contribute to a number of discipline problems. Many disciplinary referrals result from schedule transitions, when large numbers of students mix together. Restructuring the school schedule can help address each of these issues. However, different schools have different reasons for considering block scheduling. Even though block scheduling allows schools to break away from the structure of traditional schedules, educators should assess whether their school would benefit from a block schedule. Teachers need administrators' full support when changing to a block schedule, and the new scheduling should be routinely evaluated. (RJM)

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Block Scheduling: Changing the System

Roben W. Lewis

University of West Alabama

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Block Scheduling: Changing the System

In the United States, each state's compulsory education act guarantees its children the right to a free public education. The effectiveness and quality of this education has been the subject of recent concern. Major reports such as A Nation at Risk and Making the Grade have documented poor achievement in public schools. These reports showed declining SAT scores and achievement test scores when compared to other industrialized nations. Current statistics reveal high drop-out rates, high illiteracy rates, low test scores, high unemployment, high percentages of incarcerated minorities and an increasing number of teen pregnancies. They further suggest that schools are not producing informed and productive citizens who can function effectively in the world of work and realize personal fulfillment (Fallon, 1995).

A major school reform initiative is block scheduling. A number of high schools across the country are seeking better instruction and improved student outcomes by exploring alternatives to the traditional schedule (O'Neil, 1995). Scheduling is a valuable but untapped resource for school improvement. Schools nationwide have seen again and again how a well-crafted schedule can result in more effective use of time, improved instructional climate and assist in establishing desired programs and instructional practices. Before discussing the power of block scheduling to improve schools, a review of some problems scheduling can help alleviate is necessary (Reid, 1995).

Fragmented instructional time is an issue at all three levels of schools: elementary, middle and secondary. In elementary school, there are several practices that contribute to this problem. For example, poorly planned pullout programs disrupt classroom instruction. Schedules for music and art are created for periods of varying

length; core teachers must plan instruction around the remaining chopped-up time. In addition, when special programs classes meet only once a week for a short period, students receive fragmented instruction.

At the middle and high school levels, fragmentation occurs in a different way. Students who move through a six, seven, or eight-period day have little chance for in-depth study as well as the same number of pieces of unconnected curriculum each day. In middle schools, this problem may have been exaggerated by exploratory programs, which in many schools have moved from risk-free explorations to full academic courses with tests, homework, and grades (Canady, R. & Rettig, M., 1995).

The every day schedule can have a great effect on a school's climate. At the elementary level, discipline problems can result from the way small-group reading and math instruction is scheduled. Many teachers still divide their classes into reading, language arts, and math groups, which meet separately with the teacher while other students complete worksheets or work in learning centers. Way too often, teachers must stop instruction to address discipline problems that occur in the back of the classroom.

In middle and high schools, traditional schedules create situations that may contribute to a number of discipline problems. Many disciplinary referrals result from scheduled transitions, when large numbers of students spill into hallways, lunchrooms, locker rooms and bathrooms. If students are not sent to the office immediately, the problems often carry over into the classroom, where teachers must deal with them before beginning instruction. The assembly-line, traditional period schedule contributes to the depersonalizing nature of high schools. When teachers are responsible for 100-180 students on a daily basis, and students must answer to seven or eight teachers a day, it is nearly impossible to develop close relationships. Short

instructional periods may also contribute to a negative classroom climate. When discipline problem students do not respond to a quick correction, many teachers send them to the office. With only 40- to 55-minute class periods, these teachers view time taken away from class work as unacceptable (Schoenstein, 1995).

Perhaps the most indisputable fact facing schools is that some students need more time to learn than others. In high schools, reliance on the Carnegie unit has made all students prisoners of time. Secondary schools experience this problem, especially in late January. After learning their first-semester grades, some students believe that they will not pass regardless of their performance during the second semester. Many students feel they have nothing to gain by doing the work. In a way, we have created a system to handle students who need more time to learn. We give them F's and require them to repeat the course during summer school or the following academic year.

On the other hand, possibilities for acceleration in the United States' schools are very limited. Most school districts, however, offer one celebrated occasion for advancement. At the end of 7th grade, teachers must decide whether or not a student should enroll in algebra during the 8th grade. This system forces teachers to make premature decisions about a student's mathematical potential. If the schedule were not so structured maybe teachers could make the decision to accelerate students at more appropriate times.

In elementary school, we react differently to the need for varying amounts of time for learning. For those who learn quickly, we provide individual assignments. For those who need more time, we regroup, slow down, and provide pull-out programs. The problems with these methods are that sometimes the activities provided for those who learn quickly are thrown together without much preparation. Another problem is

that students placed in the lower groups fall farther behind. In addition, students who are pulled out of class are often stigmatized by their participation in them (Canady, & Rettig, 1995).

Restructuring the school schedule can help address each of these issues. When parents, students, administrators and, above all, teachers work together to create and design an approach to implement block scheduling, school reform emerges. Here are ten guidelines to help a faculty to adopt a team approach to school reform.

First, do not implement a block schedule because it's the latest trend, but because it give teachers the power to rethink and restructure their system. Different schools will have different reasons for considering block scheduling. For example, at one Michigan high school, teachers identified three goals. These goals were to permit students to enroll in one additional class every year, to create larger blocks of time for learning, and to increase the time available for professional development. In another school, teachers observed that average students tended to be invisible in the traditional schedule and needed increased teacher attention.

Secondly, restructuring may affect areas beyond your faculty's jurisdiction. For instance, there may be a need to reduce staff, alter bus schedules, or get away from negotiated contract agreements. Block scheduling is definitely not a "business as usual" approach and therefore educators may find it challenging.

Thirdly, faculty must understand the change process. Some teachers may agree that change is best for students, but not be sure whether it is good for themselves. Teachers must be given sufficient time to assess how they feel about the new schedule and to prepare for it.

Next, principals have three vital functions in implementing block scheduling.

Principals have to make sure that all interested parties are involved. They must explain the rationale for any change to the school board, central office administration, teachers, parents and students. Principals must also actively support teachers as they struggle with the demands of changing their instructional methods.

Another guideline is to consult sources outside the school. Faculty should share journal articles, attend state conferences, invite educators who have implemented block schedules to come and speak openly about any obstacles they have mastered. Also, teachers should visit other schools, being careful to select schools with different scheduling models.

Next, block scheduling allows schools to break away from the structure of the traditional schedule. Instead of focusing on the event of putting a new schedule in place, educators need to pay attention to why their school needs one.

Another important guideline is to examine the budgetary implications of implementing block scheduling. Some schools may or may not be able to obtain additional funding. Adjusting the schedule may be necessary to accommodate for lack of funds.

Administrators need to address teacher's reservations. Teachers need to prepare for the initial shock of implementing block scheduling, and recognize that things may get worse before they get better. Teachers should be reassured that the administration will support them even when they stumble.

The next guideline should be to include an evaluation component. Teachers may use many different indicators to evaluate block scheduling's effectiveness. Educators should determine these indicators before the schedule is in place so that baseline data can be collected.

Finally, everyone involved in block scheduling should share and celebrate their

successes. Administrators should take advantage of every opportunity to publicly praise the teachers for their hard work especially the first year of implementation (Hackman, 1995).

With longer chunks of time devoted to each subject, block schedules can be an agent for classroom innovation. Teachers can not just lecture when classes run past one hour. They must be prepared to deal with their students for the required length of time. Block scheduling allows teachers to use a wider variety of activities and hands-on projects which have increased student involvement. Schools that are moving to block scheduling report other positive effects as well. They say that block scheduling is more flexible, allowing them to accommodate students' many different learning needs (O"Neil, 1995).

A number of elementary schools have adopted block scheduling to reduce instructional fragmentation, improve discipline, and provide regularly scheduled opportunity for learning enrichment. The following illustration gives an example of how block scheduling is implemented using four base teachers and an extension center.

> Teachers A and B work with their homeroom classes for an uninterrupted 100 minutes. They can use this time for language arts and social studies or perhaps for a whole class reading lesson. Teachers A and B may team together for this block if desired.
>
> During the next 50 minutes, Teacher A works with Reading-Writing Group 1; Teacher B instructs Group 3. Teaching about half of the class, the base teacher conducts a reading group, or a writer's workshop, of perhaps conferences with individual students. Discipline is improved because independent groups are no longer in the back

> of the room. The extension teacher picks up Reading-Writing Group 2 from Teacher A and Group 4 from Teacher B and escorts these students to the extension center.
>
> At the end of this 50-minute period, the extension center teacher returns Reading-Writing Groups 2 and 4 to their classrooms and picks up Groups 1 and 3 for their extension time. The rest of the school day is devoted to math, science, music, the arts, and physical education (Canady and Rettig, 1995, p. 6).

Students in the extension center who need more time to learn receive assistance through reinforcement and reteaching. Any pull-outs for special services such as Chapter 1 or gifted and talented are provided during extension time. Students who have successfully mastered basic concepts work on enrichment activities.

One schedule being used with more frequency is the four block schedule. In this schedule, students spend one block a day, or ninety minutes, in language arts, a second block in mathematics, and a third block in either science or social studies. The fourth block of the day is used for physical education, music, and/or exploratory courses which meet every other day for ninety minutes. In other words, they attend only three academic courses daily.

Mathematics and language teachers teach three groups every day for the entire year; science and social studies teachers do the same but with six groups for the year. Exploratory, physical education, and elective teachers work with only three groups per day. Both teachers and students experience less stress and fragmentation with this scheduling plan. This four block schedule also significantly reduces the daily number of class changes, thereby reducing the number of discipline problems.

The W. Marshall Sellman School in the Maderia School District in Cincinnati, Ohio, implemented the 75-75-30 plan for the 180-day school year. Parents, teachers, and students all agree that this plan has been a great success. Under this plan, the school follows a typical middle school block schedule for the first 150 days. After two 75-day terms, classes end, and students begin their final six weeks of school enrolled in specialized classes.

During the past ten years, across the United States, high schools have begun to use block scheduling as a means to address curriculum fragmentation. Parry McCluer High School in Buena Vista, Virginia, use the trimester schedule with extended classes for enhanced learning. Students enroll in two classes per trimester; each class meets for two hours in the morning and comes back together for an additional 45 minutes of extended learning time in the afternoon. Most students require this additional time for learning, but a few have been allowed to contract out of the extended learning time for advanced study with another teacher (Canady & Rettig, 1995).

Included in this paper were examples of how some high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools have redesigned their schedules to reduce curriculum fragmentation, discipline problems, and student failure. Hopefully, block scheduling will move beyond individual schools to district school systems. Only recently have educators begun to capitalize on the potential of scheduling to improve schools. Students, parents, school administrators, and teachers can harness the power of block scheduling if everyone involved will keep open minds, balanced with creativity and technical expertise.

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